Sand Creek Massacre

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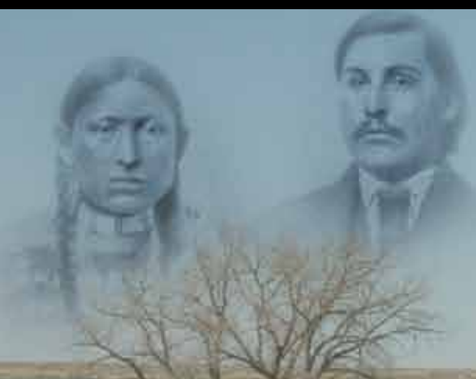
National Historic Site
Colorado

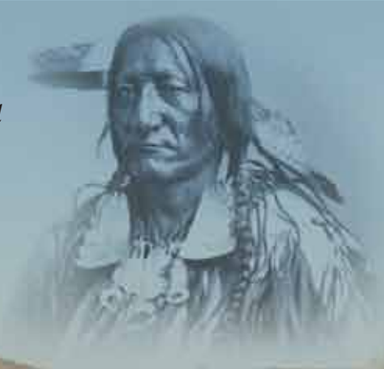
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

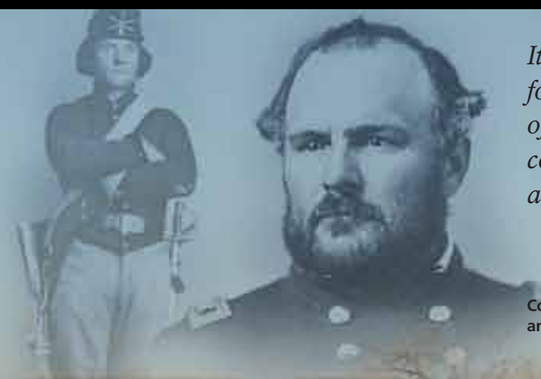


By the dim light I could see the soldiers, charging down on the camp from each side . . . at first the people stood huddled in the village, but as the soldiers came on they broke and fled . . .

—George Bent, son of trader William Bent and Owl Woman, a Cheyenne

(Left) Bent is shown with wife Magpie, niece of Black Kettle and survivor of the massacre. Cheyenne leader War Bonnet *(right)* died at Sand Creek.





It is difficult to believe that beings in the form of men, and disgracing the uniform of United States soldiers and officers, could commit or countenance . . . such acts of cruelty and barbarity . . .

—Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, 1865

Col. John Chivington *(near left)*, leader of the attack, and Pvt. Joseph Aldrich, who was killed at Sand Creek.

In the 1800s columns of U.S. Cavalry were a growing presence on the Great Plains.

BACKGROUND PHOTO: NPS; WAR BONNET & CHIVINGTON: WWW.PICTUREHISTORY.COM; OTHER PORTRAITS & CAVALRY: DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY

SAND CREEK—a windswept place haunted by violence and broken promises. The 1864 massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho people opened the last phase of a broader conflict between Native Americans and a rapidly expanding nation. At stake were two ways of using the land, of seeing the world. The massacre deepened Plains Indian resistance to American expansion, spurring a cycle of raids and reprisals. But the savagery at Sand Creek also helped awaken America to the plight of its native peoples. This remains sacred ground—a place to honor the dead and dispossessed, a place where they are not forgotten.

The Sun rising at their backs, a long column of riders moved up dry Big Sandy Creek toward the tipis along its banks. The village's 700 Cheyenne and Arapaho people were stirring, tending to chores. The temporary camp was along the northern border of the Fort Wise Treaty lands, where most felt protected. Hearing distant hoof beats, Indian women called out, "The buffalo are coming!"

But on this cold November morning the "buffalo" were hundreds of blue-clad soldiers. The alarm went through the village. Peace Chief Black Kettle raised a U.S. flag and a white flag of truce, signals of peaceful intentions. Men gathered weapons and young herders moved the pony herds. Women, children, and elderly began their evacuation up the dry creek channel and onto the plains. Cheyenne chiefs Black Kettle, Standing In The Water, and White Antelope, with Arapaho chief Left Hand, walked toward the mounted soldiers to ask for a parley. Cavalrymen crossed the creek, firing into them and the village. All but Black Kettle were killed or mortally wounded.

Col. John Chivington arrived with the artillery at the edge of the village. He gave the order to fire, then ordered the howitzers upstream. As soldiers scattered over many square miles, command and control was soon lost, and soldiers died in their own crossfire. The Colorado 3rd Regiment, a group of 100-day U.S. Volunteers, lost all unit integrity. Soon individuals and small squads chased after Indians in all directions. Captain Soule's and Lieutenant Cramer's units of the First Regiment refused to fire, standing down and remaining in formation.

Of the 100 fighting-age men in the camp, some formed lines of battle, trying to cover those fleeing. Into the early afternoon soldiers poured a relentless fire into stragglers until their ammunition ran out. Most who surrendered were executed. The treeless stream bed provided little cover. Groups of villagers dug pits in the bed in a desperate attempt to escape bullets. These "sand pits" proved worthless against almost point-blank howitzer fire. Most of the women, children, and elderly who were killed lost their lives in the sand pits.

Soldiers pursued Indians fleeing over the prairie, riding down and killing those they found. When the firing ended, 165 to 200 Cheyenne and Arapaho people were killed—two-thirds of them women, children, and elderly. Another 200 were wounded or maimed. Of the army's 675 soldiers, about 16 were killed and 70 wounded.

The next day some soldiers looted, scalped, and mutilated the dead. After ransacking and burning the camp, they left the site bearing human body parts as trophies and 600 horses, scattering the rest of the herd. Surviving Cheyenne and Arapaho people, many of them wounded, hid during the days, making their way north in frigid weather to encampments on the Smoky Hill River.

WASHINGTON, D.C. 1863 Cheyenne delegation in the White House garden with Mary Todd Lincoln *(upper right)*. Within 18 months War Bonnet and Standing In The Water had died at Sand Creek; Lean Bear had been killed by Colorado Territory troops.

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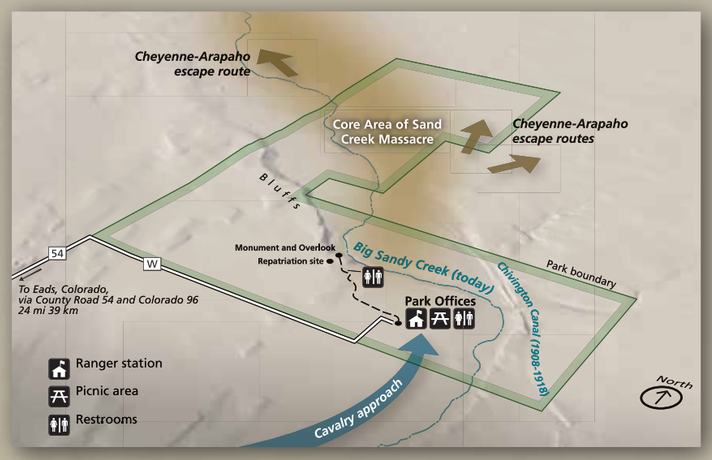

Map *(left)* shows the attack in relation to the park area. The Core Area includes archeological evidence of part of the encampment and the creek bend shown in survivor George Bent's 1914 map *(right)*.

Bent showed sites of Black Kettle's band *(1)*, other bands *(tipis closer to creek bend)*, and a pit *(2, upper left)* dug by women to escape the bullets. Warriors tried to defend it from their rifle pits *(3, in creek bed)*, but were besieged by soldiers *(4)* from all sides.

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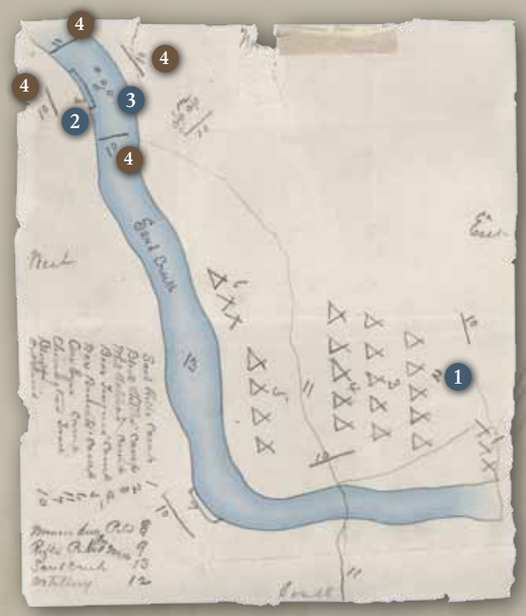


Two Cultures, One Land

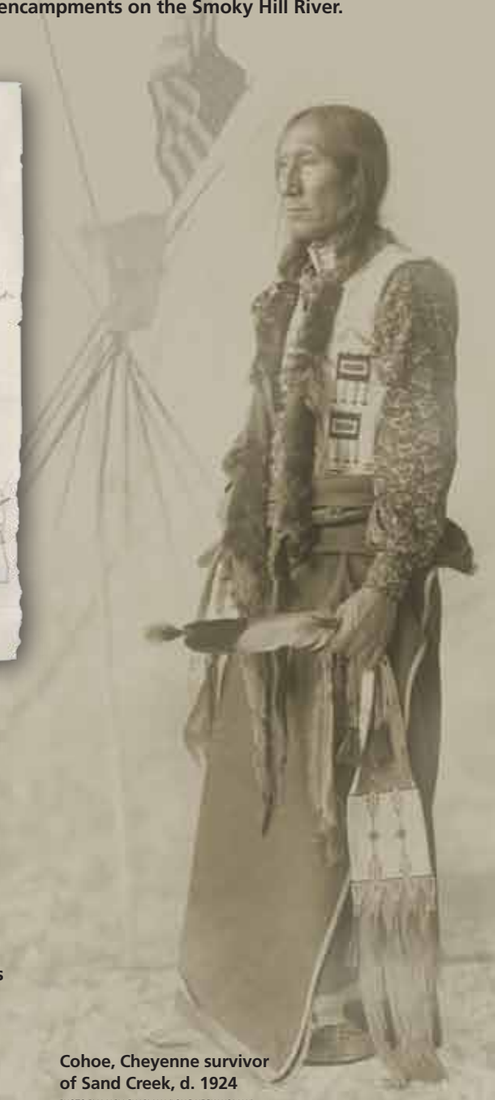
The Great Plains in the 1800s was a seemingly endless expanse of prairie stretching east from the Rockies toward the Missouri, covered with grass and shrub, threaded with tree-lined streams, tracked by great herds of buffalo. This land was the prize, the scene of both struggle and accord between Native Americans and the United States.

The Cheyenne and Arapaho came from the north. In the 1600s they had farmed from the Great Lakes to western Minnesota. Pressured from the east by other tribes, they migrated west, eventually reaching the Black Hills. In less than 50 years the horse became a crucial part of their lives. Moving south onto the plains, they entered what is now Colorado by the 1820s. They gathered and traded wild horses and hunted buffalo and other animals that provided food, shelter, tools, and hides for trade.

By 1841, through trade along the Santa Fe and other trails, these tribes built far-ranging trade networks and alliances. Bent's Fort (now Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site), southwest of Sand Creek, was one trade center. As marriages between traders and Native American women solidified these ties, the deepening economic relations significantly altered the material lives of the Cheyenne and Arapaho.

Immigrants from the United States poured onto the plains. Settlers, miners, and speculators crossed what was then called the "Great American Desert," seeking wealth or simply a new start. By 1850, through treaty, annexation, and war, the United States and its territories spanned the continent. The discovery of gold in the Rockies brought more immigrants, more settlement. By 1864 land speculation became a major business interest in a Colorado Territory poised on the brink of statehood.

The stage was set: Here were two vastly different cultures, one a rapidly growing, expansionist nation employing industrial technology, intent on fulfilling its self-proclaimed "Manifest Destiny." Directly in its path was a nomadic people dependent on the buffalo hide trade. The clash of these two cultures produced a great American tragedy.



Cohoe, Cheyenne survivor of Sand Creek, d. 1924

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